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SUBJECT: COLOMBIA SCENESETTER FOR CODEL PRICE (AUGUST 20-23)

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Summary

11. (SBU) We welcome the return of House Democracy Assistance Commission Chairman David Price and delegation to Colombia. Your visit comes as a regional debate over a U.S.-Colombia Defense Cooperation Agreement has heated up and amidst significant political developments, as Congress exerts greater legislative independence. The Colombian Congressional session began July 20, and debates over several key issues have grabbed headlines, including a referendum to allow President Uribe to run for a third term, an important victims' rights law, and a political reform that would lessen the number of political parties, but make them more accountable to voters. These debates are occurring in the context of legislative and presidential elections next spring.

12. (SBU) As many members of the delegation know from previous visits, Colombia has progressed from a near failed state and terrorist haven to an economic, political, and social leader in Latin America in the past ten years. Colombia has also achieved many security improvements and made notable progress in battling narcoterrorism, but human rights issues remain a significant concern. The Government of Colombia (GOC) and U.S. Embassy are working together to expand these successes through a new Embassy/Colombia follow-on strategy to Plan Colombia-- called the Colombia Strategic Development Initiative (CSDI), which complements the GOC's recently completed National Consolidation Plan (PCN). End Summary.

Your Visit with the Colombian Congress

13. (SBU) Colombia has made much progress since the House Democracy Assistance Commission last visited two years ago with its Congress more vibrant than ever, but facing major challenges. The Congressional leaders you will meet were surprisingly elected over President Uribe's preferred choices, and since the start of the July Congressional session, Congress has exerted greater independence from the executive branch. Under the backdrop of presidential and legislative elections next spring, there are several important issues facing the Colombian Congress. First, Congress must reach a decision on legislation that would allow President Uribe to run for a third, four-year term next year. Procedural and substantive delays in conferencing the House and Senate bills have hurt prospects for this legislation. The Uribe coalition seems to be fraying at the edges over reelection, with time working against them since the legislation needs to be approved by Congress and the Supreme Court and then put to a national vote by this November.

¶4. (SBU) Another important theme is the approval in June of a political reform designed to punish politicians who collaborate with criminal and paramilitary elements, while also increasing party responsibility and accountability for members' voting records. This landmark legislation ties Congressional votes to each member for the public record and now accounts for absenteeism. Other significant changes include an increase in the percentage of required votes needed for a party to be officially recognized, thus reducing the number of minor political parties and creating more stability in the multi-party system; changes in finance laws; and the ability for members to switch parties.

¶5. (SBU) Congress is also debating competing versions of a law designed to create a framework for reparations to victims of violence related to the ongoing armed conflict. The Congress itself is operating under the shadow of a parapolitical scandal. Thus far, 86 members of Congress (of 268 total members in the House and Senate) have been investigated for ties to paramilitaries and six have been found guilty.

Human Rights Challenges Remain

¶6. (SBU) Colombia has publicly committed to improving its human rights performance, and we hope you will be able to reinforce the human rights message with the GOC leadership. The Armed Forces dismissed over 50 military officers and enlisted men due to alleged involvement in extrajudicial killings, and the civilian prosecutors have developed criminal cases against several of them. We are working with the Ministry of Defense to improve rules of engagement, and make sure that soldiers accused of human rights abuses are investigated by civilian prosecutors. In addition, the Uribe Administration has been rocked by revelations of illegal electronic surveillance of Supreme Court justices, political opponents, and human rights groups carried out by the state intelligence service (DAS). Labor unionist homicides declined 76 percent between 2001-2008, yet in 2008 the number of labor homicides (for all causes) increased from 39 to 49--largely due to a spike in the first quarter. Still, the murder rate for unionists is well below the national homicide rate. As of June 2009, 18 murders of unionists have been reported this year.

Regional Tensions Flare

¶7. (SBU) The rifts between Colombia and its neighbors, Venezuela and Ecuador, have widened over recent scandals related to the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) terrorist group. The computers of the deceased FARC Number Two, along with a recently released video of a FARC military chief, point to FARC monetary contributions to Ecuadorean President Correa's presidential campaign as well as Ecuadorian leniency for FARC activities within Ecuador. President Chavez again recalled his ambassador to Colombia following press revelations in July that Swedish-made anti-tank missiles--originally sold to the Venezuelan military--were discovered in FARC hands (he returned to Bogota in August). The GOC has remained calm in the face of Chavez's provocative rhetoric, which included threats to deploy forces to the border, suspend trade ties, and nationalize Colombian-owned businesses in Venezuela.

¶8. (SBU) A Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) now nearing completion with Colombia would provide U.S. access to seven Colombian military facilities to facilitate cooperation to combat narcotics trafficking and other transnational crime. The DCA updates existing agreements that date back to 1952, and would not increase the U.S. military footprint in Colombia. Nevertheless, Venezuelan President Chavez, joined by leaders from Ecuador, Bolivia, and Argentina, reacted to news of the negotiations with harsh complaints over an increased U.S. military presence in the region. Chavez expressed fears of an American invasion of Venezuela and said he felt the "winds of war blowing in the continent." Even moderate governments, like Brazil and Chile, demanded an explanation. From August 4-6, President Uribe visited seven South American presidents to reassure them that the agreement did not entail the establishment of U.S. bases and was a continuation of bilateral counternarcotics and security cooperation. The rhetoric from Caracas has calmed somewhat as a result and Uribe may attend a

regional summit on security issues on August 28 in Argentina.

Post-Plan Colombia Initiatives

¶9. (U) To consolidate the gains of Plan Colombia, we have developed the Colombia Strategic Development Initiative (CSDI), which meshes with Colombia's own National Consolidation Plan (PNC). Our efforts initially focus on three priority areas of on-going conflict, drug trafficking, and social marginalization. PNC/CSDI has prioritized addressing the lack of state presence that enables coca production and illegally armed groups, and seeks to establish state presence in strategic, under-governed parts of the country. The plan is centered on increasing territorial control in these areas to provide security for communities; to achieve permanent eradication; to transfer security responsibility to the police; and to provide a wide range of socio-economic services. CSDI's core assumption is that security is the precondition for development, which gives communities a stake in the long term future of their region, which is in turn the surest way to long-term security in traditionally marginalized rural and vulnerable populations.

¶10. (SBU) The civilian lead of the PNC has yet to take full charge of consolidation efforts, leaving the Ministry of Defense (MOD) organizationally in front. This leadership vacuum means that the USG is both partner and catalyst in this effort, supplying planning and flexible funding to get consolidation from concept to implementation. Other obstacles include the need for a comprehensive GOC security strategy to transition from military to police in "consolidated" territories; more clarity on a post-eradication strategy; stronger presence of the justice sector in CSDI areas; and increased funding support for PNC ministries in the GOC budget.

The Future and Cartagena

¶11. (SBU) Your visit to Cartagena holds many keys to the issues that will play a major role in Colombia's future. With security issues largely resolved already, the effectiveness of our CSDI efforts will likely become evident in the Montes de Maria zone near Cartagena within a year. You will visit the Coordination Center that meshes civilian development, law enforcement, and military efforts to develop the Montes de Maria zone. Drug traffickers have increasingly turned to seaborne shipments of drugs either in speed (go-fast) boats, self-propelled semi-submersible boats or hidden in commercial cargo. Maritime counter-narcotics interdiction will be ever more vital to our efforts to combat drug trafficking. Our joint efforts had unparalleled success in 2008, with record seizures of cocaine on the high seas, which coupled with a record year in eradication led to double digit increases in the price of cocaine in the U.S and decreases in its purity.

¶12. (SBU) The coastal region is home to a large percentage of Colombia's African descendant population. Cartagena's charismatic and dynamic mayor is Afro-Colombian and her rise reflects grass roots efforts to increase Afro-Colombian political participation that we have nurtured. Despite important progress in recent years, Afro-Colombians still face daunting discrimination and remain the country's poorest, short-lived and often internally displaced group. The future of the fifth of Colombia's population that is Afro-Colombian will help determine the course for the country. The GOC has warmed to grass-roots Afro-Colombian efforts, and the Colombian Congress is poised to take action on sweeping anti-discrimination and affirmative action legislation supported by President Uribe.

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